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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 2285 (2016), by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 30 April 2017 and requested me to provide a report to it on the situation in Western Sahara before the end of the mandate period. It covers developments since the last report dated 19 April 2016 (S/2016/355) and describes the situation on the ground, the status and progress of the political negotiations on Western Sahara, the implementation of resolution 2285 (2016) and the existing challenges to the Mission's operations and steps taken to address them.

II. Recent developments

2. On 14 August 2016, Morocco began clearing an area inside the buffer strip below Guerguerat, in the south of the Territory, and paving a desert track linking its position at the berm and the Mauritanian border post 3.8 kilometres to the south. MINURSO received no advance notification of the activity. On 18 August, Morocco's coordinator with MINURSO sent a letter to the Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of Mission confirming that the clearance activities under way in the Guerguerat area had started on 14 August and were being conducted by the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie and customs officers, without the intervention of Royal Moroccan Army personnel.

3. On 15 August 2016, Frente Polisario deployed armed personnel to a position immediately beyond the southernmost reach of the road construction in order to stop the Moroccan works from proceeding. Those personnel were replaced on 29 August by armed elements from what the Frente Polisario has described as its "National Gendarmerie", and a fully armed protection rear guard was positioned behind them in the buffer strip. On 16 August, MINURSO started to conduct regular ground patrols and aerial reconnaissance over Guerguerat. On 28 August, the Mission deployed a static team of military observers between the Moroccan and Frente Polisario positions along the road during daylight hours and conveyed to the parties its readiness to maintain a night presence, if requested, and to set up a team site, if required.

4. Frente Polisario insists that the presence of its armed elements in and near Guerguerat was established in self-defence against Morocco's attempt to change the

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status quo by paving the desert track and has argued repeatedly that the potentially explosive situation requires a solution beyond the "mere recording of violations" of military agreement No. 1. Frente Polisario further maintains that Morocco's activities in the buffer strip constitute a violation of military agreement No. 1, which, inter alia, prohibits the entry of military personnel or equipment by ground or air and the firing of weapons in or over the area, and of the 1991 ceasefire. The core of its argument is that, according to Moroccan law, the Royal Gendarmerie is an integral part of the Royal Moroccan Army and has military status. Frente Polisario also argues that, when the ceasefire came into effect in 1991, there was neither an opening in the berm nor civilian traffic between the berm and the Mauritanian border in Guerguerat, and that the current traffic therefore violates the status of the Territory and of the ceasefire, since it changes the status quo of the buffer strip.

5. In its communications with MINURSO and the Secretariat, Morocco has strongly objected to the accusations that it has violated military agreement No. 1, which does not prohibit civilian activities. It insists that its clearing and paving actions were an exclusively civilian operation undertaken by a civilian contractor and its Royal Gendarmerie and customs services to counter illicit activities and facilitate road transport between Morocco and Mauritania and beyond and that no Royal Moroccan Army personnel had crossed the berm. Morocco also insists that the presence of Frente Polisario inside the buffer strip, the hoisting of flags of the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic", the erection of what it terms to be prohibited structures and the impediments to the transit of civilian vehicles are violations of military agreement No. 1 and an unacceptable challenge to the authority of the United Nations and MINURSO. It has repeatedly informed MINURSO and the Secretariat that it cannot be expected to refrain from reacting to the situation indefinitely.

6. On 25 August 2016, MINURSO wrote to both parties, urging them to refrain from conducting any activity inside the buffer strip. On 28 August, my predecessor released a statement calling on both parties to suspend any action that altered the status quo and appealing to them to withdraw all armed elements to prevent any further escalation. He also called on the parties to permit MINURSO to pursue discussions with them to reach a resolution, stressing the need to adhere to their obligations under the ceasefire agreement and to respect its letter and spirit.

7. In early September 2016, Moroccan engineers finished paving the road up to the position of the Royal Gendarmerie, which was approximately 120 metres from the position of the Frente Polisario "National Gendarmerie".

8. The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations visited Rabat, Laayoune and Rabouni, from 21 to 24 October 2016 and conducted an aerial reconnaissance flight over Guerguerat. He reiterated my predecessor's call for the full withdrawal of both sides and received assurances of their intention to avoid escalation and their commitment that neither side would provoke a return to hostilities.

9. In December 2016, Frente Polisario military forces were reported in the media to have reached the coastline along the Cape Nouadhibou peninsula south of Guerguerat, hoisting the flag of the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" in the presence of the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario. Although MINURSO did not detect any human presence on its repeated aerial reconnaissance flights along the peninsula, two flags were spotted. The Frente Polisario leadership also confirmed to MINURSO that a number of its elements had "reached the Atlantic coastline" but provided no further details.

10. Furthermore, Frente Polisario established additional positions staffed by military forces in the buffer strip along the protection rear guard. The personnel established several structures south of the Gendarmerie line, within a radius of 2 kilometres, consisting of small drywall constructions, some of which had roofs and

were the height of a person. MINURSO observed tents, as well as flags or insignia of the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" in at least three of the locations. Morocco submitted numerous complaints to the Secretariat and MINURSO opposing these activities, describing them as "unacceptable provocations".

11. Tensions continued to rise until they reached a peak in mid-February 2017, when Frente Polisario started impeding the movement through Guerguerat of civilian and commercial vehicles displaying Moroccan insignia and maps showing Western Sahara to be part of Morocco, citing the latter, in particular, as a deliberate provocation. On several occasions, MINURSO observed damage to vehicles whose drivers had ignored the request by Frente Polisario units to stop at their position or who had stopped but were obliged to remove Moroccan insignia. Such damage included broken windows or scratches to paintwork caused by Frente Polisario elements during the removal of insignia. Morocco vigorously protested these incidents, requesting MINURSO to intervene.

12. On 25 February 2017, I issued a statement strongly urging Morocco and Frente Polisario to unconditionally withdraw all armed elements from the buffer strip near Guerguerat, to adhere to the letter and spirit of their obligations under the ceasefire agreement and to refrain from obstructing regular commercial traffic. On 26 February, Morocco announced its unilateral withdrawal from the buffer strip so as "to immediately apply and respect the request made by the United Nations Secretary-General". Initially, Morocco indicated that removing the Royal Gendarmerie from the buffer strip would be contingent on the full withdrawal of the Frente Polisario presence, the removal of its constructions and the completion of the road to the Mauritanian border. The same day, Frente Polisario issued a statement sharing my concerns over the situation in Guerguerat, but arguing that the situation was not an isolated incident and that the crisis could therefore be overcome only by taking the "decolonization process" for Western Sahara into account, which would open the way to its withdrawal. Frente Polisario also placed conditions on its withdrawal from the buffer strip, including a full Moroccan withdrawal from the area, as well as demonstrable progress in the negotiating process and on broader issues, such as Morocco's respect for the status, privileges and immunities of MINURSO (see para. 58 below) and the Mission's return to full functionality.

13. All construction by Frente Polisario has now ceased, but the movement of vehicles with Moroccan insignia and maps continues to be impeded. Meanwhile, MINURSO has maintained its temporary presence in the area during daylight hours and stands ready to establish a longer-term presence, if required.

14. MINURSO was unable to return to full functionality within the 90-day time frame stipulated by the Security Council in its resolution 2285 (2016). On 12 June 2016, an agreement was reached with the Government of Morocco on the return of 25 of the expelled international staff members, who were subsequently redeployed to the Mission. Numerous consultations have been undertaken with the Government of Morocco on the return of the remaining affected staff. In March 2017, the Secretariat initiated steps to address the status of those staff members who remained affected. Subsequently, on 4 and 5 April, the Permanent Representative of Morocco conveyed, in separate meetings, to my Under-Secretaries-General for Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations his authorities' readiness to accept the immediate return of all 17 MINURSO staff members who have been unable to return to their duty station since March 2016.

15. A mission support review was carried out in late 2016 to ensure that the MINURSO support structure enabled it to effectively implement its mandate. The review identified a number of ways to streamline the Mission's work processes, rationalize staffing levels and deliver services more efficiently.

16. Overall, the mission support review provided guidelines for critical actions to enhance the robustness and agility of the Mission's support component, including by restructuring support to include supply chain and service delivery and by moving certain non-location-specific posts to Entebbe, Uganda, and Brindisi, Italy.

17. In a military capability study, finalized in March 2017, it was noted that the Mission's security posture and capacity needed to be improved to better respond to the evolving security challenges. In particular, upgrading security infrastructure at team sites was identified as a priority, along with the augmentation of existing aviation capacity to ensure that the Mission was able to complete mandated observation tasks in areas of increased threat. The adoption of adjusted patrolling and support tasks was also noted as a positive step, although regular reviews were required to ensure mandate delivery and security. The lack of full functionality has been seen to impede the military activities of the Mission owing to the increased demands on military observers to perform support tasks.

18. On 7 October 2016, insofar as MINURSO could ascertain, legislative elections were held without incident in Morocco and in the part of Western Sahara under Moroccan control. In a letter to my predecessor dated 24 September 2016, the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario denounced Morocco's conduct of these elections in Western Sahara, calling them an "illegal and provocative act given its status as a Non-Self-Governing Territory".

19. On 6 November 2016, King Mohammed VI delivered an address to mark the forty-first anniversary of the Green March, focusing on Morocco's application to rejoin the African Union. Regarding Western Sahara, the King stated that Morocco's "southern provinces" were strong "thanks to their populations' commitment to their Moroccan nationality and to the nation's political system". The address also praised "the specific development model and projects launched in the region", and the potential for Western Sahara "to become an integrated development hub, at both the regional and continental levels, and a platform for economic cooperation between Morocco and Africa". He also indicated that "Morocco will remain open and ever ready to engage in constructive dialogue in order to find a final political settlement". Frente Polisario issued a statement strongly criticizing the substance of the King's speech, calling its delivery in Dakar a reflection of "its expansionist policy against neighbours" and "a deliberate offence against Africa and its continental organization".

20. In the refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, public life and social activities were conducted peacefully and in a relatively calm atmosphere.

21. On 31 May 2016, the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario, Mohammed Abdelaziz, passed away. Brahim Ghali was elected as his successor at an extraordinary congress, held on 8 and 9 July, following his nomination by the National Secretariat of Frente Polisario.

III. Political activities

22. Both parties expressed criticism of certain elements of the previous report (S/2016/355). In a letter to the Personal Envoy dated 23 April 2016, the representative of Frente Polisario in New York stated that "the Polisario is and will remain attached to the referendum on self-determination". In a letter to my predecessor dated 24 April 2016, the Permanent Representative of Morocco criticized the report as unbalanced in its presentation of the facts and the positions of the various stakeholders.

23. In June 2016, the Personal Envoy began to consult the parties and neighbouring States on a resumption of the negotiating process. Frente Polisario, Algeria and Mauritania were consistently encouraging, while Morocco noted that more time was needed before the atmosphere would be conducive to a resumption of talks.

24. In a letter dated 29 July 2016 addressed to both parties and both neighbouring States, the Personal Envoy formalized his request and indicated his desire to visit the region before the seventy-first session of the General Assembly to review recent developments and their implications, as well as the regional situation. Frente Polisario, Algeria and Mauritania responded that they stood ready to receive him at any time. Morocco replied positively, in principle, but deferred providing a concrete response. On 2 September, the Permanent Representative of Morocco informed the Personal Envoy that Morocco preferred to receive him after the new Government had formed, following the legislative elections on 7 October.

25. On the margins of the opening of the seventieth session of the General Assembly, the Personal Envoy consulted with a wide range of European, African and Latin American representatives, all of whom had expressed strong but general support for the negotiating process. He also met with senior representatives of both parties and both neighbouring States.

26. The then Minister-Delegate to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Morocco, Nasser Bourita, reiterated that his country "remains a defender of, and engaged in, the negotiating process, to which it is committed on the basis of its autonomy initiative". He noted that, for Morocco, the conflict is a regional dispute with Algeria. He also indicated that the Personal Envoy would be welcome to visit Morocco after the new Government had formed and ideally after the conclusion of the twenty-second session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Marrakech, Morocco, from 7 to 18 November 2016. A member of the National Secretariat of Frente Polisario, Mohammed Salem Ould Salek, expressed regret over the lack of progress in the negotiating process. He emphasized the eagerness of Frente Polisario for the process to resume and reiterated its readiness to receive the Personal Envoy. He also described the difficulty that Frente Polisario was facing in maintaining the commitment of Western Saharans to the 1991 ceasefire in the absence of any progress towards the referendum for which the ceasefire had been established.

27. The Minister of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Algeria, Ramtane Lamamra, underscored the importance of reviving the negotiating process, welcomed the Personal Envoy's proposed visit and stressed that his country would play a positive role in support of the parties once the process was once again under way. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Mauritania, Isselkou Ould Ahmed Izid Bih, also welcomed the Personal Envoy's visit and stressed his county's concern regarding the security situation in the region, including the worrisome developments in the Guerguerat region of Western Sahara, as well as the need to resolve the overall conflict in order to improve the living conditions of all of North Africa's populations through economic integration.

28. On 18 October 2016, the Personal Envoy briefed the Security Council, outlining the factors that had prevented progress to date in the negotiating process, including the failure of one or both of the parties to implement the Council's guidance. He encouraged Council members to press both parties to engage in a genuine process of preparing a fifth round of formal negotiations to be held without preconditions and in good faith.

29. On 15 November 2016, my predecessor met with King Mohammed VI on the margins of the twenty-second session of the Conference of the Parties and

underscored the importance of making progress in the Western Sahara negotiating process, as called for in the relevant Security Council resolutions. The King confirmed Morocco's intention to continue working towards a solution within the United Nations framework, but added that he could not meet with the Personal Envoy prior to his departure on an extended trip through Africa. A senior member of the Secretariat was told in a subsequent meeting that Morocco would no longer receive the Personal Envoy because of his alleged bias in favour of Frente Polisario and Algeria.

30. In response to an invitation from the Government of France, the Personal Envoy visited Paris from 21 to 23 November 2016 to exchange views on the stalemate in the negotiating process and the tense situation in Guerguerat. His interlocutors expressed continued support for United Nations efforts, heightened interest in working to revive the negotiating process and a readiness for further dialogue on how best to proceed in the light of seven years of deadlock.

31. The Personal Envoy sent me a letter dated 23 January 2017 tendering his resignation effective on a date of my choosing. On 24 January, I received a Moroccan emissary who transmitted the King's readiness to work with me seeking a resolution of the Western Sahara dispute and who confirmed that Morocco would no longer receive the Personal Envoy.

32. On 29 January 2017, I met with the Prime Minister of Algeria Abdelmalek Sellal, the Minister of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ramtane Lamamra, and the Minister of Maghreb Affairs, the African Union and the Arab League, Abdelkader Messahel, on the margins of the African Union summit in Addis Ababa. We discussed the situation in Guerguerat as well as the need to resume the negotiating process on Western Sahara. I expressed my understanding of the complexity of the situation and my desire to maintain a frank dialogue with Algeria as I strive to relaunch the negotiating process. The Prime Minister reaffirmed the readiness of Algeria to continue working with the United Nations.

33. On 17 March 2017, I received the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario for an introductory meeting that permitted him and his delegation to detail the position of Frente Polisario on the entire range of issues pertaining to Western Sahara and to set forth its expectations of the Secretariat and the Security Council. I expressed my concern over the situation in Guerguerat and my disappointment that Frente Polisario had not yet withdrawn from the buffer strip in response to my appeal of 25 February. I confirmed my earnest intention to work to relaunch negotiation efforts with a new dynamic and a new spirit, but insisted that I needed the parties' help in creating an environment conducive to negotiations, in particular by bringing the tensions in the Guerguerat area to an end.

IV. Activities of MINURSO

A. Operational activities

34. As at 15 March 2017, the military component of MINURSO consisted of 244 personnel, 11 of whom were female, against the authorized strength of 246. The military component remains deployed at nine team sites and a liaison office in Tindouf.

35. From 1 April 2016 to 15 March 2017, MINURSO conducted 7,560 ground patrols covering 10,32,165 kilometres, 427 aerial patrols and visited units of the Royal Moroccan Army and the military forces of Frente Polisario to monitor

adherence to the military agreements. Beginning in August 2016, 70 special aerial patrols were conducted over Guerguerat and along the Cape Nouadhibou peninsula to monitor developments. West of the berm, MINURSO military observers regularly visited 589 units, 38 training areas and 316 observation posts of the Royal Moroccan Army and monitored 399 notified operational activities. East of the berm, the military observers regularly visited 79 units, 11 training areas and 39 observation posts of the Frente Polisario military forces and monitored four notified operational activities. The Royal Moroccan Army complained three times to MINURSO that supporters of Frente Polisario had held demonstrations near the berm, denouncing them as provocations. MINURSO monitored the demonstrations from a distance and did not observe the presence of Frente Polisario military forces among the demonstrators. Local cooperation with the Mission's team site commanders has been maintained at a generally satisfactory level by both parties.

36. West of the berm, MINURSO recorded four general violations by the Royal Moroccan Army, in addition to the nine long-standing violations indicated in the report on the situation concerning Western Sahara dated 10 April 2015 (S/2015/246, para. 25). The general violations concerned tactical reinforcements at two strong points and one observation post, as well as the failure to notify MINURSO of troop movements on one occasion. MINURSO also recorded a violation by the Royal Moroccan Army in relation to a shooting incident that took place in the buffer strip near Mijek on 27 February 2016, leading to one civilian casualty, the review of which was not completed in time for the previous report (S/2016/355, para. 6). The Royal Moroccan Army's second line of defence, 15 kilometres from the berm, which remained operational (S/2016/355, para. 34), has constituted a major long-standing violation since September 2008. In response to notifications sent by the Mission with regard to those long-standing violations, the Royal Moroccan Army stated that they were "operational necessities" stemming from a changed environment and the need to fight terrorism, smuggling and other illicit activities and that they were unrelated to the ceasefire agreement. It further stated the need to replace 18 inoperable artillery pieces.

37. East of the berm, MINURSO observed and recorded eight general violations: the entry of Frente Polisario military forces into the buffer strip on two occasions; the temporary establishment of an observation post inside the buffer strip near Bir Lahlou; the holding of a military exercise by Frente Polisario without notifying MINURSO on two occasions; the relocation of accommodation of one company of Frente Polisario armed forces; and two freedom-of-movement violations. These violations were in addition to the three long-standing violations indicated in previous reports.

38. MINURSO is reviewing the activities of both parties in the Guerguerat area in the light of possible violations of military agreement No. 1 or of the spirit of the 1991 ceasefire agreement.

39. Since security concerns precluded the Mission's ground patrols in the buffer strip and along the Cape Nouadhibou peninsula between 15 August 2016 and 15 March 2017, 74 reconnaissance flights were conducted, placing a considerable strain on the Mission's limited air assets. Between 29 August 2016 and 26 February 2017, MINURSO maintained a presence between the Moroccan and Frente Polisario elements during daylight hours. That presence was subsequently extended to monitor the activities of the Frente Polisario "National Gendarmerie" after the withdrawal of Moroccan forces on 26 February 2017. Safety concerns required personnel to withdraw overnight to the town of Dakhmar.

B. Mine action

40. Landmines and explosive remnants of war continued to pose a threat to the Mission's ceasefire monitoring efforts. As of 15 March 2017, 50 cluster bomb strike areas and 36 minefields remained east of the berm. Morocco's expulsion of the Mission's mine action international staff from Laayoune in March 2016 resulted in the suspension of demining operations east of the berm from 20 March to 15 September 2016, when the MINURSO Mine Action Coordination Centre resumed its operations from Tindouf, where it had been relocated.

41. In support of the Mission's ceasefire monitoring, the Mine Action Coordination Centre conducted clearance of landmines and explosive remnants of war, route verification east of the berm and landmine safety training to incoming MINURSO staff. During the reporting period, 1,856,569 m^2 of land were released and 900 explosive hazards, including 678 cluster sub-munitions, 189 unexploded ordnance items and 17 anti-tank mines, were destroyed. The Coordination Centre cleared 19 cluster strike areas of medium to high priority and verified 65 km of patrol routes to facilitate MINURSO patrols to the east of the berm.

42. The Royal Moroccan Army reported the clearance of more than 217,980,000 m^2 of land to the west of the berm and the destruction of 949 items.

C. Security

43. The security environment in the Mission's area of responsibility remains vulnerable to the potential for regional instability. Primary responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of United Nations personnel, assets and resources rests with Morocco, Frente Polisario and Algeria (in and around Tindouf), which continue to cooperate on security matters.

44. My Special Representative continued to engage with her Moroccan, Frente Polisario and Algerian counterparts to address the changing security environment. The Moroccan authorities continued a constructive discussion with MINURSO on enhancing their protective measures for the United Nations west of the berm. Frente Polisario regularly updated the Mission on possible threats and suggested further protection measures east of the berm and in the refugee camps. The Royal Moroccan Army and Frente Polisario responded positively to the requests by MINURSO to augment their protection of its team sites (S/2016/355, para. 46). MINURSO has also increased its alertness and situational awareness, although its security section has been affected by limitations to its full functionality.

45. On 23 November 2016, MINURSO received information from a Member State that a terrorist group affiliated with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had identified MINURSO team sites east of the berm as targets. The group had published a video on 5 May 2016 calling for attacks against MINURSO and Morocco and is also believed to have been involved in the kidnapping of three international humanitarian workers from Rabouni, near Tindouf on 23 October 2011 (see S/2012/197, para. 51). MINURSO therefore increased security measures around the team sites east of the berm and for MINURSO personnel movements. Frente Polisario officials confirmed the threat and reiterated their commitment to provide protection for the MINURSO static team site installations east of the berm. However, on several occasions, Frente Polisario warned that it was unable to guarantee the secure movement of the Mission's patrols or supply convoys unless they were protected by Frente Polisario mobile armed escorts.

46. In response to the warnings, the Department of Safety and Security conducted security assessments focusing on activities east of the berm, in Tindouf and in the refugee camps, based on which the existing restriction on all night-time movements of United Nations staff in Tindouf and the refugee camps was extended, distance limitations were placed on ground patrols east of the berm and remote areas with limited Frente Polisario presence were avoided. Possible risk-mitigating measures continue to be assessed, and MINURSO is adjusting its processes on an ongoing basis.

47. Observation coverage has been augmented by aerial patrols to observe areas inaccessible to ground patrols, while the logistics supply chain has been reviewed to minimize non-critical movements. Supplies delivered by road have been limited to lifeline items, including bulk water and fuel, as well as assets requiring ground transportation. All other supplies are being delivered by air. In view of that situation and the increased need for aerial reconnaissance in Guerguerat, the limited air assets of MINURSO have been under strain, prompting the Mission to request an additional helicopter, which would substantially increase its capacity to conduct aerial reconnaissance, meet logistics demands and carry out casualty or medical evacuations.

48. MINURSO has also reviewed the static security installations at team sites east of the berm, which had not been overhauled for some time, and has prepared plans for upgrading security facilities to address the evolving threat. Concurrently, all MINURSO personnel were instructed to apply extreme caution and vigilance during movements east of the berm and around Tindouf.

49. The above measures do not offer permanent solutions to ensuring the most secure environment possible for the Mission's civilian and military personnel in extremely exposed and remote locations. While the acquisition of an additional helicopter to enhance reconnaissance capacities would certainly alleviate the impact of the above-mentioned reduced patrol regime, more sustainable solutions will need to be found.

D. Substantive civilian activities

50. Only 25 of the Mission's international staff were redeployed to Laayoune in mid-July 2016 as part of an agreement with the Government of Morocco on restoring MINURSO to full functionality.

51. Despite the significantly reduced international staff capacity of the Mission and the onset of the crisis in Guerguerat, my Special Representative has endeavoured to maintain sustained contact with the parties, primarily through their respective coordination offices.

52. West of the berm, and despite the Security Council's repeated calls for access to all interlocutors, the Mission's access to local interlocutors was essentially limited to the Moroccan coordination office for civilian staff and representatives of the Royal Moroccan Army for the military component. The access enjoyed previously to other local interlocutors (S/2014/258, para. 47) has yet to be restored. The Mission continued to receive regular visits by representatives of embassies in Rabat.

53. East of the berm and in the refugee camps near Tindouf, MINURSO maintained access to representatives of Frente Polisario and refugees, as well as with local and international civil society organizations. Primarily through its leadership and its liaison office in Tindouf, the Mission maintained constructive

cooperation with Frente Polisario on operational and other matters related to the implementation of its mandate.

54. The significant increase in tensions stemming from the situation in Guerguerat has, however, led to increased criticism of MINURSO and the United Nations by both parties for their perceived inability to resolve the stalemate.

E. Challenges to the operations of the Mission

55. As noted in previous reports, the parties have significantly divergent interpretations of the Mission's mandate. In Morocco's view, the role of MINURSO is limited to monitoring the ceasefire, supporting demining and assisting the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with confidence-building measures in the event that such activities resume after their interruption in July 2014; it does not encompass contact with civil society or other civilian actors. In contrast, in the view of Frente Polisario, organizing a referendum on self-determination remains the central element of the Mission's mandate, with ceasefire monitoring and other activities subordinate or instrumental to that aim. In fact, it has become clear that some aspects of the implementation of the mandate remain subject to the agreement of the parties. In addition, the ability to perform all standard peacekeeping functions, including independent reporting on developments in and related to Western Sahara, remains key to an effective response to the expectations and requests of the Security Council.

56. West of the berm, the Mission's previous contact with the regional offices of the Moroccan National Human Rights Council in Laayoune and Dakhla, sporadic contact with locally elected officials and tribal sheikhs and occasional travel by the Mission's political affairs officers to Smara and Dakhla for consultations with local authorities helped the Mission obtain a broad and impartial understanding of the situation for the purposes of reporting to the Secretariat and the Security Council. However, even these limited contacts have been restricted since March 2016. A military liaison office in Dakhla was closed at the request of Morocco in April 2016. Furthermore, the agreement in principle reached with the Government of Morocco in 2015 on the use of United Nations number plates on MINURSO vehicles west of the berm has yet to be implemented, and the situation described previously persists (S/2016/355, para. 49).

57. Safety considerations, including the presence of explosive remnants of war, bar the Mission's military observers from ground movements around Guerguerat. Mine clearance in the buffer strip is not foreseen in the relevant agreements with the parties, considerably limiting the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments. These verifications have to be conducted using the Mission's limited air assets. Furthermore, the team assigned to monitor developments in Guerguerat had to be re-assigned from other team sites, further straining ceasefire monitoring operations elsewhere. Since the beginning of the crisis in Guerguerat, the parties have also raised an increasing number of allegations, requiring the Mission's military observers to conduct verification exercises in each instance.

58. In a letter dated 13 November 2016, the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario, Brahim Ghali, complained about Morocco's continued practice of affixing stamps on the passports of MINURSO staff members in Western Sahara and requiring that United Nations vehicles bear Moroccan licence plates. He made reference to the separate letters that the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel had sent to the Government of Morocco and to the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario, calling upon them to respect the status,

privileges and immunities of MINURSO in that regard (S/2016/355, paras. 35-37). Mr. Ghali warned that, unless the United Nations is able to ensure Morocco's compliance with those provisions, Frente Polisario will not feel bound to adhere to them either. Potential measures may include imposing entry procedures east of the berm for MINURSO personnel (S/2016/355, para. 35).

59. In view of the potential disruptive implications of such measures, MINURSO established a logistics hub in Tifariti and permanently redeployed medical staff from the military medical unit. This will enable MINURSO to ensure continuity of operations at team sites east of the berm for 90 days if movement disruptions occur. While necessary, this has severely overstretched the Mission's medical and logistical capacity. To address that issue, MINURSO reiterates its request for 11 additional paramedics and three additional doctors for the military medical unit provided by Bangladesh.

V. Humanitarian activities and human rights

A. Persons unaccounted for in the conflict

60. The International Committee of the Red Cross continued to act as a neutral intermediary between the parties, working with the families of individuals who are still unaccounted for in relation to past hostilities.

B. Assistance to the protection of Western Saharan refugees

61. UNHCR continued to provide international protection to Western Saharan refugees living in the five camps near Tindouf and, together with its partners, delivered life-saving assistance and livelihood activities, targeting young people in particular. This included multisectoral activities in the areas of protection, shelter, water and sanitation, health, nutrition, education, provision of non-food items and livelihoods. Pending the consideration of the registration of refugees in the camps near Tindouf, as requested by the Security Council in its resolution 2285 (2016), the humanitarian assistance provided by UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) continued to be based on a planning figure of 90,000 vulnerable refugees, with WFP providing an additional 35,000 food rations to persons with poor nutritional status, for a total of 125,000 monthly food rations.

62. Following the inter-agency emergency response to the heavy flooding in October 2015, UNHCR shifted to the second phase of the response, namely providing materials to rebuild damaged or destroyed homes, constructing homes for persons with specific needs and rehabilitating and constructing schools. Owing to insufficient funding, shelter rehabilitation activities targeted only the 2,000 most vulnerable families of the 17,841 families that were affected.

63. Operations continued to be affected by underfunding, despite high-level efforts to mobilize additional assistance. Following my predecessor's visit in March 2016, he called for more attention to the plight of refugees from Western Sahara, for increased funding to support them and for a meeting of donors to be held in Geneva. Donor briefings led by UNHCR were held in September and November 2016, in Algiers and Geneva, respectively. A joint appeal requesting $135 million for humanitarian needs in 2016 and 2017 followed. As of the end of 2016, UNHCR had received funding for only 34 per cent of its annual requirements ($29 million).

64. Owing to shortages in commodities, the WFP supply of food fluctuated and minimum requirements were not met over several months. UNHCR and WFP

conducted a joint nutrition and food security survey in the five camps, which indicated that rates of anaemia in women and children had significantly increased and that malnutrition in pregnant and lactating women had become a concern. UNHCR has been working, together with relevant service providers, on cases of sexual and gender-based violence to ensure that referral mechanisms and legal, medical and psychosocial support are available. A women's centre has been built to address individual cases with specific protection needs.

65. UNCHR is continuing to pursue its multi-year livelihoods strategy, focusing, in particular, on youth empowerment.

C. Confidence-building measures

66. The confidence-building measures programme stipulated in the plan of action of 2012 has been suspended since June 2014. While continuing its dialogue with the parties, UNHCR remains ready to facilitate the prompt resumption of the programme. With 12,114 registered individuals waiting to benefit from family visits, UNHCR remains committed to the programme's mandate and principles.

D. Human rights

67. Representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) last visited Laayoune and Dakhla from 2 to 18 April 2015 and Tindouf from 29 July to 4 August 2015, and engaged with relevant interlocutors to plan a follow-up mission to Western Sahara once the new Government of Morocco was in place. In 2016, OHCHR had to rely on reports from various stakeholders, including the Government of Morocco, Frente Polisario, non-governmental organizations working on human rights and international human rights mechanisms.

68. The special procedures of the Human Rights Council did not visit Western Sahara during the reporting period. The Government of Morocco has maintained its request that a follow-up visit to Western Sahara by the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, originally scheduled for April 2015, be delayed.

69. In its concluding observations adopted on 2 November 2016 (CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6), the Human Rights Committee welcomed Morocco's efforts to combat torture and ill-treatment and noted a marked reduction in such practices since the issuance of its previous concluding observations in 2004 (CCPR/CO/82/MAR). The Committee nonetheless expressed concern about continued reports of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment perpetrated by agents of the State in Morocco and Western Sahara, particularly in the case of individuals suspected of terrorism or endangering State security or posing a threat to "the territorial integrity of the State", which Morocco defines as including Western Sahara.

70. According to various sources, the lack of accountability for these and other human rights violations against Western Saharans, as well as the persistent lack of any investigation into allegations of such violations, were major concerns during the reporting period. As of 27 February 2017, despite ongoing discussions, the Government of Morocco had not established or designated a national preventive mechanism for inspecting places of detention as envisaged by the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. On 22 February 2017, the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture announced that it intends to visit Morocco in 2017.

71. Several Western Saharan human rights groups continued to experience difficulties in carrying out their activities, as the Government of Morocco continued to reject their registration and, therefore, their legal recognition. In that respect, the Moroccan National Human Rights Council received at least 10 complaints from local organizations.

72. Similarly, the alleged harassment of Western Saharan human rights defenders by the Moroccan authorities remains of serious concern. Restrictions were reportedly imposed on some human rights defenders entering and leaving Western Sahara west of the berm, thereby limiting their freedom of movement. According to local and international sources, Moroccan authorities allegedly restricted access to Western Sahara for foreign visitors, including journalists and human rights defenders. The Government of Morocco confirmed to OHCHR that some 187 foreigners were forcibly expelled from the "southern provinces", reportedly for failing to abide by immigration rules or for "undermining national security".

73. Although it remained difficult to obtain independent confirmation, various credible sources reported that the Moroccan authorities continued to routinely prevent or disperse gatherings in Western Sahara west of the berm. In several instances, protesters and activists were allegedly subjected to arbitrary arrest, unfair trial and imprisonment on trumped-up charges. In a note verbale to OHCHR dated 17 February 2017, the Government of Morocco indicated that 776 protests had been organized in the "southern provinces" in 2016, including 343 in Laayoune, and confirmed that 66 had been dispersed for non-respect of the law.

74. In July 2016, the Moroccan Court of Cassation ordered the full retrial of 23 Western Saharan co-defendants in the Gdeim Izik case, including 21 prisoners who had been sentenced to life in prison by a military court.[1] The first retrial started in December 2016, but was adjourned until 31 January 2017. The last trial took place on 13 March 2017. In a letter dated 12 March, the Secretary-General of Frente Polisario called for the release of the prisoners and of all Western Saharans imprisoned for expressing their political views. In a letter dated 26 March, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Morocco rejected the misrepresentations that "the other parties" were putting forward on this case.

75. Western Saharans continue to face alleged discrimination in the practice of their economic, social and cultural rights. In its concluding observations, the Human Rights Committee also expressed its concern about the limited progress made regarding the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara and the failure to adopt the measures necessary to consult the people of Western Sahara on the exploitation of their natural resources (CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6, para. 9).

76. During the period under review, Frente Polisario continued to express its readiness to cooperate with United Nations human rights mechanisms. The few human rights groups that exist in the refugee camps continued to operate freely, without any reported impediments.

VI. African Union

77. During the reporting period, Morocco did not permit the observer delegation of the African Union, led by Yilma Tadesse (Ethiopia), to return to Laayoune and resume its collaboration with MINURSO.

78. Meanwhile, the Assembly of the African Union, at its twenty-eighth ordinary session, held in Addis Ababa on 30 and 31 January 2017, accepted Morocco's

[1] S/2013/220, paras. 14, 81 and 82; S/2014/258, para. 81; and S/2016/355, para. 57.

application for membership as its fifty-fifth member State, following its ratification of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. The African Union expressed the hope that the membership of Morocco would facilitate the speedy resolution of the dispute over Western Sahara in a manner consistent with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

VII. Financial aspects

79. The General Assembly, in its resolution 70/283, appropriated the amount of $52.6 million for the maintenance of the Mission for the period from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017. My proposed budget in the amount of $55.2 million (exclusive of budgeted voluntary contributions in kind) for the maintenance of the Mission for the period from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018 has been submitted to the Assembly for its consideration during the second part of its resumed seventy-first session. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of MINURSO beyond 30 April 2017, the cost of maintaining the Mission would be limited to the amounts approved by the Assembly. As at 21 March 2017, unpaid assessed contributions to the Special Account for MINURSO amounted to $39.6 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations as at that date amounted to $1,124.1 million. Troop costs have been reimbursed for the period up to 31 October 2016, while the costs of contingent-owned major equipment and self-sustainment have been reimbursed for the period up to 30 September 2016, in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

VIII. Observations and recommendations

80. The conflict over the future legal status of Western Sahara must come to an end as soon as possible to enable the region to confront security threats, economic challenges and human suffering in a coordinated and cooperative manner. The efforts of the United Nations, including those of my Personal Envoy, MINURSO and the agencies present on the ground remain highly relevant.

81. In a series of resolutions beginning in 2007, the Security Council has directed the Secretary-General to facilitate direct negotiations between the parties to reach "a mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara". Over the years, the Council has provided ample guidance that the negotiations are to occur without preconditions, in good faith, taking into account the efforts made since 2006 and subsequent developments, and working with realism and a spirit of compromise. The parties have been called upon to show political will and to work in an atmosphere favouring dialogue, to enter into a more intensive and substantive phase of negotiations and to discuss each other's proposals in preparation for a fifth round of formal negotiations. The Council has also called on the parties and neighbouring States to cooperate more fully with the United Nations and with each other to achieve progress and has invited Member States to lend appropriate assistance.

82. Despite the achievements of two successive Personal Envoys in providing the necessary facilitative framework, the parties have not taken advantage of this framework to engage in a cooperative search for a solution in accordance with the guidance of the Security Council. The fundamental difficulty is that each party has a different vision and reading of the history and documents relating to the conflict. Morocco insists that Western Sahara is already part of Morocco, that the sole basis for negotiations is its initiative for autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty and that Algeria must be a party to those negotiations. Frente Polisario insists that, since the

General Assembly identifies Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory, its autochthonous population must decide its future in a referendum with independence as an option, that all proposals and ideas the parties put forward should be on the table and that the only parties to the negotiation are Frente Polisario and Morocco.

83. On the basis of consultations with the parties and neighbouring States, members of the Group of Friends on Western Sahara and the Security Council, as well as other important stakeholders, I intend to propose that the negotiating process be relaunched with a new dynamic and a new spirit that reflect the Council's guidance, with the aim of reaching a mutually acceptable political solution that includes resolution of the dispute over the legal status of Western Sahara, including through agreement on the nature and form of the exercise of self-determination. For progress to be made, the negotiations must take into consideration the proposals and ideas of both parties. Algeria and Mauritania, as neighbouring countries, can and should make important contributions to this process.

84. Each party that I will be consulting has a role to play in increasing the chances of success. If the current framework of negotiations is to achieve results on the basis of the existing guidance of the Security Council, difficult decisions will be required of the parties, their supporters and the Council itself. If these decisions are not forthcoming, the appropriate conclusions will have to be drawn.

85. In exercising its mandate as outlined in paragraph 55 above, MINURSO makes an important contribution to promoting the stable and peaceful environment needed to create the necessary minimal conditions for the resumption of negotiations in the context of my efforts and those of my Personal Envoy. It also retains an important role in keeping the Secretariat and the Security Council informed of developments in and surrounding Western Sahara. These include developments relating to the ceasefire and to the political and security conditions in its area of operations that have a direct bearing on the negotiating process. I therefore recommend that the Council extend the mandate of MINURSO for a further 12 months, until 30 April 2018.

86. The Mission's reporting functions depend on its ability to perform the full range of standard peacekeeping functions without hindrance, so that it may reach an independent and unbiased assessment of the situation on the ground and its potential impact on peace and stability in Western Sahara. I call on the Security Council to use its good offices to support the efforts of MINURSO in this respect.

87. While reviews were conducted to align the Mission's resources with recent developments in its operational environment, its staffing levels need to be adequate to the tasks it faces and in order to meet the expectations of the Security Council. In that regard, the decision communicated by Morocco on 4 and 5 April 2017 to allow all MINURSO staff members to return to their posts will enable a return to full functionality. I am grateful to the members of the Council for their support and their efforts to restore the Mission to full functionality. I also ask the Council to support the Mission's request to strengthen the medical unit provided by Bangladesh by adding three medical and 11 paramedical staff.

88. I welcome the positive response of Morocco to my call for both parties to withdraw from the buffer strip in Guerguerat and remain deeply concerned by the continued presence of Frente Polisario armed forces. That presence poses challenges to the raison d'être of the buffer strip, including the expectation that it would create a zone free from the direct presence of the parties to the conflict or direct contact between them. Recognizing that the current situation may threaten the existence of the ceasefire regime, I ask the Security Council to urge Frente Polisario also to withdraw from the buffer strip in Guerguerat fully and unconditionally. I welcome the parties' continued assurances of their intention to avoid all acts that could lead

to a resumption of hostilities, but note that the risk of an incident, or an accident, remains high and that the possible consequences could have a dangerous impact on security and stability throughout the region.

89. The crisis in Guerguerat raises fundamental questions regarding the ceasefire agreement and military agreement No. 1. Those agreements, which are used as the primary tool in the Mission's ceasefire monitoring activities, bind only the parties' respective military forces and contain no provisions on civilian activities. Certain activities may, however, be assessed as being contrary to the spirit of the 1991 ceasefire or as acts that might lead to a resumption of hostilities.

90. The security situation in Western Sahara, especially east of the berm, poses a tangible threat to United Nations personnel and assets. Under these circumstances, I urge the Security Council to support the Mission's efforts to secure the means required to protect its staff, military observers and facilities in Western Sahara. Increased threats to ground movements and the need to monitor the situation in Guerguerat have considerably increased the Mission's aviation resource needs, leading to the request for an additional helicopter. The Mission must review how it can fulfil its mandate in a safe, secure and effective manner. Static security measures at team sites also urgently need upgrading.

91. I note with great concern the chronic lack of funding for the refugee programme and the deteriorating humanitarian situation, which is especially precarious as needs are increasing while funding is diminishing. Overall, barely half of the humanitarian requirements provided by the relevant agencies were funded in 2016. The amount required to cover humanitarian needs is expected to increase to approximately $75 million in 2017. I therefore call on the international community to increase funding to this vital humanitarian programme and appeal to new donors to support life-saving assistance.

92. I urge the parties to respect and promote human rights, for example, by addressing gaps and enhancing cooperation with OHCHR and other United Nations human rights mechanisms, including by further facilitating OHCHR follow-up visits. Independent, impartial, comprehensive and sustained monitoring of the human rights situation in Western Sahara and in the refugee camps is required in order to ensure the protection of all Western Saharans.

93. In conclusion, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to my Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, for his engagement with the parties and neighbouring States. Similarly, I am very grateful to my Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of MINURSO, Kim Bolduc, and Major General Wang Xiaojun, as well as his predecessor, Major General Muhammad Tayyab Azam, for their dedicated leadership of MINURSO. These committed international officials have my appreciation for the work they have been carrying out in the most difficult of circumstances.

Annex

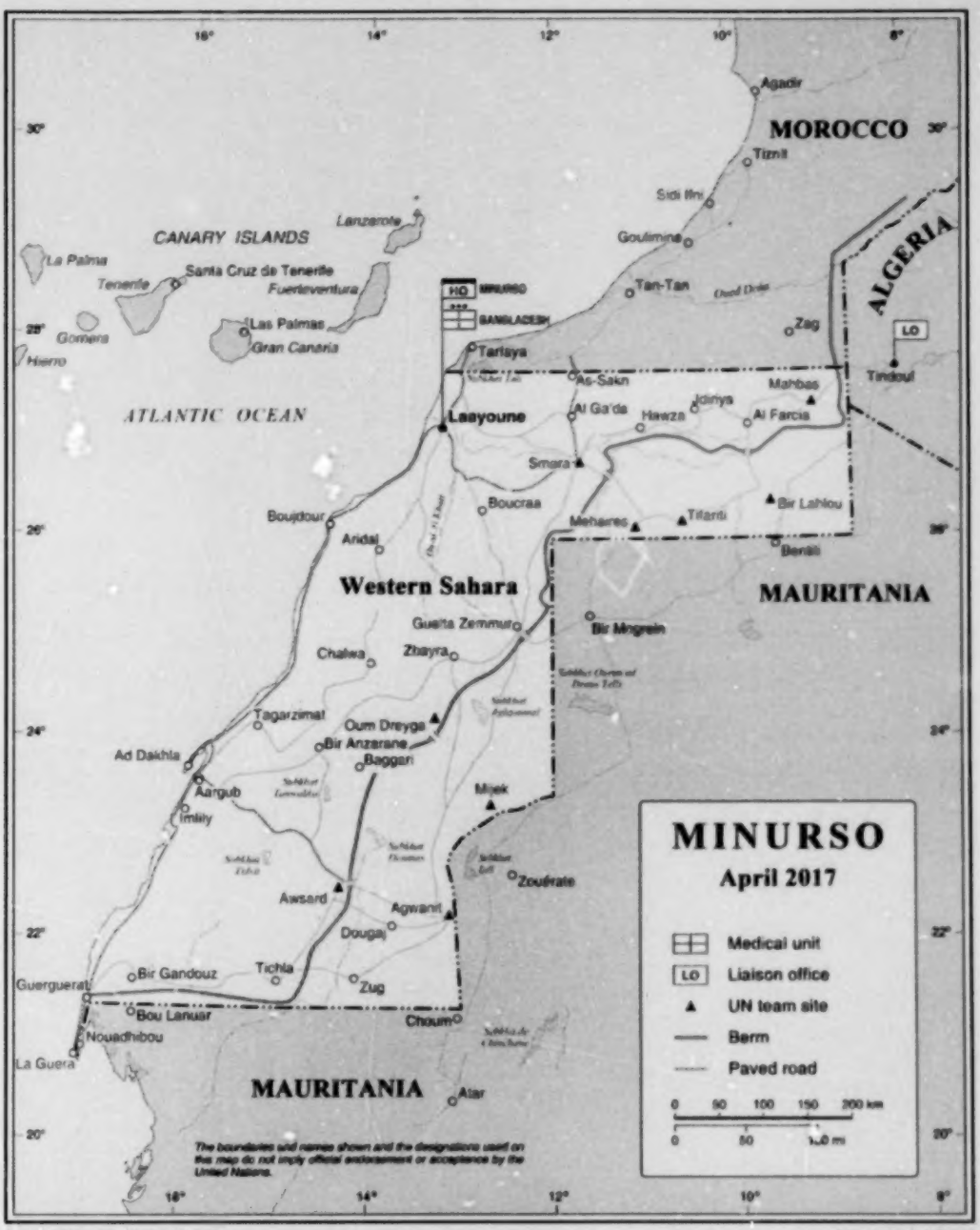
United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

Contributions as at 22 March 2017

Country	*Military observers*[a]	*Troops*[a]	*Civilian police*[b]	*Total*
Argentina	3	–	–	3
Austria	5	–	–	5
Bangladesh	8	20	–	28
Brazil	8	–	–	8
Bhutan	2	–	–	2
China	12	–	–	12
Croatia	7	–	–	7
Djibouti	1	–	–	1
Egypt	21	–	–	21
El Salvador	3	–	–	3
Finland	–	–	1	1
France	2	–	–	2
Germany	3	–	–	3
Ghana	8	7	–	15
Guinea	5	–	–	5
Honduras	12	–	–	12
Hungary	7	–	–	7
India	3	–	–	3
Indonesia	5	–	–	5
Ireland	3	–	–	3
Kazakhstan	4	–	–	4
Malawi	3	–	–	3
Malaysia	10	–	–	10
Mexico	4	–	–	4
Mongolia	4	–	–	4
Montenegro	2	–	–	2
Nepal	6	–	–	6
Nigeria	7	–	–	7
Pakistan	14	–	–	14
Poland	1	–	–	1
Portugal	–	–	1	1
Republic of Korea	4	–	–	4
Russian Federation	16	–	–	16
Sri Lanka	3	–	–	3
Switzerland	2	–	–	2

Country	*Military observers*[a]	*Troops*[a]	*Civilian police*[b]	*Total*
Togo	1	–	–	1
Yemen	8	–	–	8
Total	**207**	**27**	**2**	**236**[c]

[a] Authorized strength is 246, including the Force Commander.
[b] Authorized strength is 12.
[c] Actual strength on the ground, for military and civilian police, including the Force Commander.


MOROCCO
ALGERIA
MAURITANIA
Western Sahara
ATLANTIC OCEAN
CANARY ISLANDS
Agadir
Tiznit
Sidi Ifni
Goulimine
Tan-Tan
Zag
Tindouf
Tarfaya
Laayoune
As-Sakn
Al Ga'da
Hawza
Idriya
Mahbas
Al Farcia
Smara
Boucraa
Bir Lahlou
Tifariti
Mehaires
Benaili
Boujdour
Aridal
Guelta Zemmur
Bir Mogrein
Chalwa
Zhayra
Tagarzimat
Oum Dreyga
Bir Anzarane
Baggari
Ad Dakhla
Aargub
Imlily
Mijek
Zouérate
Awsard
Agwanit
Dougaj
Guergerat
Bir Gandouz
Tichla
Zug
Bou Lanuar
Choum
Nouadhibou
La Guera
Atar
Lanzarote
La Palma
Tenerife
Santa Cruz de Tenerife
Fuerteventura
Las Palmas
Gran Canaria
Gomera
Hierro
HQ MINURSO
BANGLADESH
LO
MINURSO
April 2017
Medical unit
Liaison office
UN team site
Berm
Paved road
0 50 100 150 200 km
0 50 100 mi
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Map No. 3691 Rev. 82 UNITED NATIONS
April 2017(Colour)
Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)

S/2017/308

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United Nations S/2017/308

Security Council

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13 April 2017

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Letter dated 10 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I would like to transmit a letter from the President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Anas Abdah, dated 7 April 2017 (see annex).

I would be grateful if you could have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Alya Ahmed S. **Al-Thani**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

17-06092 (E) 180417

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Annex to the letter dated 10 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

On the morning of 4 April 2017, the world woke up to the horrific news of Assad's chemical attack on innocent civilians in Khan Sheikhoun. This massacre, which killed about 100 civilians, was not only, unfortunately, a manifestation of Assad's criminality but also a manifestation of the international community's failure to take action where it must to protect civilians and to support the Syrian people in their just struggle for freedom, justice and dignity. Unlike the victims of the 2013 chemical massacre, however, the cries of the victims of the chemical massacre in Khan Sheikhoun seem to have been heard and the people of Syria finally woke up to a newfound hope and sense of justice on 7 April 2017, as President Donald Trump ordered a targeted strike against the air base from which Assad launched his deadly attack on Khan Sheikhoun.

After more than six long years of utter abandonment, the Syrian people have finally regained hope that Assad's crimes against them will no longer go unpunished.

The National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has welcomed the strike by the United States, which has become necessary as the Security Council continues to be paralysed by recurrent Russian vetoes. We believe the action by the United States to be consistent with international resolutions and principles, including Council resolutions 2118 (2013), 2209 (2015), 2235 (2015) and the responsibility to protect. We join President Trump in his call for civilized nations to join the United States to rid Syria of Assad's terrorism.

Not only will a forceful approach deter Assad and curb his crimes against the Syrian people, but it will also exert the necessary leverage on Assad to engage seriously in the political process, which has otherwise been at a stalemate for quite some time. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, as the political representative of the Syrian people, is still keen on engaging in the political process leading to a political transition in which Assad and his clique have no role. The massacre in Khan Sheikhoun, as well as the many violations of the ceasefire and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, has made it clear that Assad cannot be part of Syria's future or transition.

I trust you agree that it is high time for Assad's crimes to be punished and justice served. Scaling up today's strike into a full-scale no-fly zone will strip Assad from his deadliest and only military advantage in his war against his own people. It would also enable the Free Syrian Army to advance in creating the necessary balance of power on the ground to make the political process viable. While the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces shares the international community's belief that the solution in Syria can only be political, we believe that unless Assad comes under genuine pressure and military challenge he will not engage in the process. Furthermore, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces takes this opportunity to reiterate the importance of accountability and to demand that Assad and all war criminals be referred to the International Criminal Court or other justice mechanisms to put an end to the culture of impunity that has emboldened Assad for far too long.

We count on the sincerity of our good friends and allies to assist the Syrian people in their legitimate struggle for freedom, justice and dignity.

(*Signed*) Anas **Abdah**
President
National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces